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In Defense of the CIA's Undercover 'Links'

When the stream of criticism and contempt for the Central Intelligence Agency rolls so forcefully and resolutely, one risks all manner of accusations if he moves against the tide.

But move against it I must, for there are some tragic aspects of the furor over the CIA's financing student, labor and other private groups that have not been given adequate attention.

Surely I break no vows of secrecy made in my government days if I say now that this string of "exposes" of CIA associations can go on and on. There are dozens of yet unnamed groups that cooperated with CIA—simply because they believed it to be in their children's and the nation's interest.

I admire one of them—the Hobby Foundation of Houston, Texas—for publicly expressing pride in having cooperated.

The disciplines of self-acclaimed intellectualism, or liberalism, or idealism compel some people to deplore these private involvements in the dirty business of waging a cold war. They say the health of the nation requires that our press, universities, students et al remain "free of government manipulation."

I cannot understand the schizophrenia that has caused these purists to exempt the Federal Bureau of Investigation from criticism for so long. The FBI has its hand, and agents, in far more domestic organizations than the CIA. But somehow the press and the public have accepted that as necessary to trap those frightful spies and saboteurs.

It must be reckoned one of the great public relations failures of American history that the CIA has not won acceptance for its clandestine activities on the valid ground that it is fighting the same deadly struggle as the FBI.

As the tedious string of "revelations" unwinds, I conclude that American opinion-molders have become almost as psychotic about "the CIA" as those foreigners who talk as though the agency is capable of overthrowing their governments on five minutes' notice.

The harsh truth is that these exposures have destroyed the CIA as an effective instrument in many arenas of the cold war that is still being waged furiously, despite the recent talk about "detente." So what the Communists spent billions —unsuccessfully—to do, we Americans, out of our idealism, have delivered to them as a gift.

It disturbs me that this rush to bare CIA "links" has tainted "Crossroads Africa," the "American Society for African Culture" and other groups that have worked honestly and intelligently to keep alive in millions of Africans a faith and hope in democracy.

Sanctimonious, theoretically correct arguments that "private business and industry" should have provided the funds demolish themselves against one hard fact: Business and industry had neither the interest, the attitudes nor the inclination to support these efforts properly.

It bothers me that these "revelations" have compromised, perhaps fatally in some cases, hundreds of young men and women who might have become leaders of the developing nations.

The wounds inflicted upon the Alliance for Progress are grave.

Many a U.S. Peace Corps worker or diplomat, and numerous foreign scholars and labor leaders who have struggled bravely in the cause of freedom, will have their integrity impugned and their futures jeopardized before this great expose fizzles out.

Sure, one can say the CIA built this colossal tragedy by wrongly involving all these peoples and groups in the first place.

I say nonsense. Several presidents, several cabinets, dozens of congressmen and the leaders of all the groups involved went into this business with their eyes wide open. And it wasn't because of an ugly assumption that the ends justify the means, as some idealists argue. They made a practical recognition of the fact that the adversary had already set the dirty rules of battle, so either we played by his rules or got our brains beaten out.

I can't find it in my journalistic heart to say the press is wrong to dredge up all it has about CIA "covers." Yet, I have an uneasy feeling that in pursuit of a hallowed bit of journalistic dogma, we are slaying some dragons that will come back to haunt our progeny.

I keep remembering President Kennedy saying to the American Newspaper Publishers Association in 1961:

"This nation's foes have openly boasted of acquiring through our newspapers information they would otherwise hire agents to acquire through theft, bribery or espionage . . .

"Today no war has been declared — and however fierce the struggle, it may never be declared in traditional fashion . . .

"If the press is awaiting a declaration of war before it imposes the self-discipline of combat conditions, then I can only say that no war ever posed a greater threat to our security."

Is it heresy for me to ask whether the benefits to "freedom" accruing from these exposes of the CIA are great enough to balance out the damage done to our security?

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